

## ***Dr. Bill: What's Worked for Me this Winter***

Welcome to the winter guide to gardening in Texas! In this quarterly series, I will discuss success that I have experienced each season in my garden and want to share with you.

Late fall and winter are the ideal time to plant bulbs for late winter and early spring. In reality, bulbs can be planted most any time but root growth begins naturally as summer ends and fall rains cool and soften the summer-baked soils. Although it may seem elementary, first-time gardeners need facts, like which end is up when planting a bulb? The answer is pretty simple. The pointed end goes up and the rounded one goes down. Roots will emerge from the rounded end while leaves and flowers come from the top. The rounded and larger bottom is known as the bulb plate. If this bulb plate is cut off, the bulb will die, but if even a part of the plate remains it will usually heal itself and prosper. If ever unsure which end is up, plant a bulb sideways!

Depth of planting is another easily solved issue. Generally let the pointed top of the bulb be buried about twice its height. In heavy soils plant a little shallower than in sandy ones. Spacing may be a compromise between your budget and your desire for a quick effect. Smaller bulbs as close as 2 or 3 inches apart. Large bulbs like crinums and amaryllis may be set as much as 2' or more apart. Fertilizer is best used sparingly, but organic material such as composted pine bark, alfalfa meal or compost from your own garden when worked into the top 8-10 inches of the soil is usually helpful.

**Heirloom bulbs** have become an integral part of our sense of place in the South. Every season has opportunities for making these easy-to-grow perennials welcome guests for you, your family, and friends. Some will grow almost anywhere, while others respond better to specific sun, shade, and soil types. Availability for bulbs that naturalize in Texas and the South has improved. Specialty sales events like the Garden Club of Houston's Bulb Mart, Master Gardener events in Tyler, Montgomery and Brazos Counties along with Chris Wiesinger's Southern Bulb Company have increased awareness of these well adapted perennials.

**Narcissus** are certainly among the most important spring flowering bulbs for Texas. The problem with most commercially available narcissus (daffodils) is that they are for colder climates. There is a reason that the smaller flowering narcissus we find in old cemeteries, around old homes and abandoned homesites prevail. I would like to list some that thrive for us in Texas. By choosing these you are beginning the bloom season early (December, January) and extending it until April. For vigor N. 'Grand Primo' is unrivaled across the South. Three or four stems per bulb emerge over a one month period. Pleasantly fragrant ivory-white blossoms having slightly darker cups grow like they are on steroids!



**Narcissus intermedius** (Texas Stars) have slightly taller foliage with fragrant blooms nestled in the foliage. A third recommendation is N. x odorus, the 'Campernelle', which along with Texas Stars and 'Grand Primo' is among the most useful bulbs ever introduced to the South. Its bright yellow trumpets are intermediate in size between those of jonquils. Although of more recent origins, N. 'Golden Dawn' has been shown to prosper and increase over most

of the South. Its vigor is close to that of 'Grand Primo' and the clusters of yellow and orange flowers make a real show in the garden.



**Snowflakes** (*Leucojum aestivum*) begin appearing along with the midseason narcissus and are equally useful. They usually start blooming in February and continue for at least six weeks. Their foliage is another great addition to the garden. Snowflakes thrive under large pecan and oak trees. The species form is at least two hundred years old but has been joined by the cultivated 'Gravetye Giant' named in honor of the home of famous English horticulturist William Robinson (1838-1935). The lily-of-the-valley-like-flowers have a dot of green on each petal and are almost twice the flower size of the species. Both thrive in our Texas and Southern gardens. Although they thrive in sun or shade snowflakes will naturalize under large pecan and other deciduous trees that allow sun and natural rainfall to penetrate their canopy in winter and become dormant in summer when the trees are active.

**Iris albicans** is known as "Cemetery White Iris" and distinguishes itself in southern gardens in early spring. Many Texas and Southern gardeners can grow bearded and Louisiana irises but *Iris albicans* is the toughest iris of all. Our ancestors often planted them at gravesites because they knew they would likely be a survivor! Transplanting can be successful at any time but by dividing and setting them out in mid-summer there is time for the plants to establish themselves prior to their early to mid-spring flowering season.



**Hardy Amaryllis**, *Hippeastrum x Johnsonii* (red & white) is the all-time favorite amaryllis for the South. It is sometimes known as the St. Joseph's lily or "Johnson's amaryllis". Its originator crossed two species of amaryllis around 1790 in England. No other amaryllis is as vigorous and its combination of red flowers, white stripes and delightful fragrance make it a southern favorite. Dividing the clumps will encourage more plants, but they don't seem to mind being crowded. Commercial availability is a challenge because the bulbs are smaller than typical hybrid amaryllis bulbs and are sometimes perceived as inferior bulbs. Generous "gardeners in the know" have shared them with one another for more than two centuries. Cultivated amaryllis also often thrive and naturalize for us in Texas and serve as useful and attractive perennials.

**Blackberry Lily, *Belamcanda chinensis*:** Useful plants can sometimes be overlooked for generations, then "rediscovered", if they have sufficient merit. I believe that is the case with the Blackberry Lilly. It was a favorite of Presidents George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and grown at both of their gardens.

They are Asian perennials easily grown in Texas gardens from seed or divisions. It is a robust iris-like plant that bears red-spotted orange flowers on tall stalks followed by unusual seed heads that closely resemble blackberries. The plants are attractive all year and are easily divided or transplanted. Thomas Jefferson grew them at Monticello and called them "Chinese ixia". He first grew them from seed he obtained from nurseryman Bernard McMahon in 1807.



Blackberry lilies were also grown by Thomas Affleck, a famous Natchez MS nurseryman who moved to a 2000 acre nursery site at Gay Hill, TX (Washington County) Texas, in the 1850s. I visited his original nursery site in Natchez and was invited to collect blackberry lily divisions from that site about 25 years ago.

Jason & Shelly Powell own Petals from the Past Nursery near Birmingham, AL and are both Horticulturists who graduated from Texas A & M University. They mail order roses, perennials, fruiting plants and also offer blackberry lilies as well as many other interesting plants. Their retail nursery site is a great place to visit and they offer “pick your own” fruits of various kinds in season.

**Antique Roses:** Among the inheritances we Southern gardeners have received are some of the horticultural treasures our great grandparents loved. Above all other flowers, they loved roses. These survivors from lost gardens are special. For unlike the inanimate heirlooms preserved among old Southern families----and in antique shops---old roses are living reminders of our heritage. Every spring they create anew their colors and perfumes, and in their vigor and grace they keep our past ever young. These flowers are not copies, not “restored”, not a re-creation. They are the real thing and in a world of synthesized, replicated material possessions, real beauty deserves to be cherished and lovingly preserved.

The renewal of interest in old garden roses and some of the new roses for the landscape come together to provide a new opportunity for adding color and interest to our landscapes. The winter season is the ideal time for setting out new roses in our gardens. It is good to consider the roles that roses can play in our landscapes. Climbing roses have always been a dramatic way to display them. Trellises, fences and walls draped with roses have always been a garden favorite around the world. Roses are also useful for hedges, specimens and in containers.

It is interesting that rose propagation has made a full circle. Our ancestors mostly rooted them from stem cuttings and nursed them along for a year or so until they were large enough to make a showing in the landscape. There was a long period when roses were mostly commercially grown by grafting or budding flowering wood onto prepared rootstocks where they were usually grown a year or so to be placed in commercial nurseries and mail order sources for mostly bareroot transplanting. Own root roses are back in favor and are usually available in two or three gallon containers for easy transplanting into home and commercial landscapes.

**Top Ten Antique Roses:** Below is a list and brief description of what I consider to be among the top ten roses for Texas and the South. Now is an ideal time to set them out. Roses prosper in sunny locations with at least a half day of direct sunlight. They also prefer soil that has been amended with large amounts of organic material such as composted pine bark or your own compost. Late winter/early spring is also a good time to apply commercial or organic sources of fertilizer. Water at planting and during dry spells especially in summer.

Prune existing roses fairly heavily (one third to one half) in January and lighter again in mid-August. Climbing roses should have their canes trained and pruned after their spring bloom. Occasional removal of weak and overgrown canes on climbing roses keeps them looking their best. Removing spent flowers keeps both shrub and climbing roses looking neater and encourages more frequent flowering.

#### A Top Ten List of Old Garden Roses



1. "Katy Road Pink", also known as 'Carefree Beauty', is one of the most vigorous shrub roses available. Matures to a three to five foot shrub. Fragrant and reblooms most of the year. If allowed to its mature its fruit they are round, reddish and attractive. Flower fragrance is also outstanding.



2. 'Old Blush', the original everblooming China rose. Bright pink and lightly fragrant. Useful as a 3-5' hedge or specimen.



3. 'Souvenir de la Malmaison' a very double medium size bright pink rose that blooms repeatedly throughout the growing season. Often considered one of the most beautiful roses ever created and occasionally found in old Texas gardens.

4. 'Marie Pavie' is a small shrub that reblooms continuously. It is nearly thornless and has a heavenly scent. Consider it for a low growing hedge or container specimen. The small pink flowers fade to nearly white.







5. "Martha Gonzales" was found by Pam Puryear at the home of Martha Gonzales in Navasota. It is a compact grower and blooms continuously. Consider it as a low hedge or mass. The small, bright red flowers are nicely scented and have a very long bloom season.

6. "Natchitoches Noisette" is a medium size shrub that blooms continuously. I found it growing in the American Cemetery in Natchitoches, LA. It was growing in an open area. It is one of the most useful roses I know. Consider it for hedges, masses or specimens. In good soils plants make 4-6' mounds. This Baton Rouge parterre garden features "Natchitoches Noisette".



7. 'Mutabilis' is a vigorous, large growing single flowering rose that changes from red to pink and orange-yellow. It blooms continuously and is typically 4-6' tall and round.

8. 'Belinda's Dream' Dr. Robert Basye was a math professor at Texas A & M University and was passionate about breeding roses at his farm near Caldwell, TX. In a letter to me dated January 25, 1987 he modestly said "Last summer I budded onto R. fortuniana a rose I think you should have - a cross I made some twenty years ago. The bush is of hybrid tea stature, a very prolific everbloomer and need never be sprayed I will not describe it further but say that, after twenty years of observation, I give it very high marks....." Vigor, fragrance, disease resistance and rebloom make it one of the best shrub rose available.



9. 'Archduke Charles' was released prior to 1837 and grown in many early Texas gardens. It is a China rose that re-blooms much of the year. It has a more refined rose than most of the Chinas. A single bush may appear to bear blooms of several different colors simultaneously because the flowers' colors change rapidly from red, pink and white as they age.

10. Lady Banks Roses were brought from China to England around 1800 and named for Lady Banks whose husband, Lord Banks directed the Royal Horticulture Society. The yellow form is thornless and the white one has some thorns but also has a nice fragrance. The Banks roses are vigorous, tough and capable of creating a large vine that can cover trees, fences and structures. The bloom season is early spring and relatively short but the vine is graceful and easily grown.





### About the Author

Dr. Bill Welch is presently a Landscape Horticulturist for Texas AgriLife Extension Service. He is a native of Houston, Texas, has an undergraduate degree in Landscape Architecture and a doctorate in Horticulture and Extension Education from LSU. He is an honorary member of the Garden Club of America and recognized with their Distinguished Service Award. Bill is also a lifetime member of Texas Garden Clubs, Inc. and The Southern Garden History Society. He works closely with the Master Gardener program and has conducted the Landscape Design Study Courses for many years. He is a lifetime member of the Texas Association of Nurserymen and a founding board member of the Texas Certified Nursery program. The American Horticulture Society has awarded Dr. Welch their B.Y. Morrison Communication Award.

Dr. Welch has written several books about gardening in Texas and the South, including Perennial Garden Color, Antique Roses for the South, The Bountiful Flower Garden (with Neil Odenwald), Heirloom Gardening in the South (with Greg Grant), The Bulb Hunter (with Chris Wiesinger), and The Rose Rustlers (with Greg Grant). For many years, Dr. Welch wrote a monthly garden column for Southern Living Magazine and Neil Sperry's Gardens. Dr. Welch helped found The Antique Rose Emporium near Brenham, TX.